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Interpretation of Oriental Consciousness

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of The
College of Fine and Applied Arts in
Candidacy for the Degree of
Master Of Fine Arts

Interpretation of Oriental Consciousness

By

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Interpretation Of Oriental Consciousness

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Introduction

Three years ago in the San Francisco Airport, I found myself walking into a huge anthropological laboratory. That was the first moment I felt what you might call an identity crisis. The re-evaluation of my background leads me to an interpretation of oriental consciousness through my paintings.

When I first started this thesis, I faced two choices: Should I:

1. speak the language of oriental art with something of a modern accent?

or,

2. speak the language of modern art with something of an oriental accent?

I took the first choice.

When I finished my thesis, I was not sure that the choice mattered. As Michael Sullivan said, in his Meeting of Eastern and Western Art:

"In the transmission of art from one culture to another, it is not that forms and materials themselves are important but the ideas and attitudes that lie behind them."¹

The interpretation of oriental consciousness, through

a self-identity, leads to not the synthesis, but the interaction of Eastern and Western arts.

There are two parts in this thesis. The first part is oriental consciousness which is the metaphysical part of the thesis. The second part is my interpretation which is the technical part.

ORIENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS

CHAPTER I

I CAN NEVER NAME IT

There is something.

Like the Canadian goose leaving its footprints on the spring snow and flying away, it is clear, re-occurring, and yet intangible.

I can never name it.

Although I can never name it, it is worthwhile to think about because it makes painting possible for me. Like LAO TSU, said,

"The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao. The name that can be named is not the eternal name." 2

Although I can never name it, I am deeply aware of its existence.

It is in the rock garden, the ineffable icons, the journal of Leo Tolstoy, the sayings of counting cows, and the first Utopia.

Although I can never explain something like oriental consciousness logically, I create atmosphere.

The path through those icons, journal, garden, sayings, led me to the atmosphere which....I still can't name it....but, nothing matters if you know it and I know it.

CHAPTER II

ROCK GARDEN

The Rock Garden is in Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto.

It is also inside me. This a garden which has no tree, bush or flower, but a small rectangular space covered with white sand and surrounded by an earth wall. The only object used in the design are fifteen stones arranged in groups. Visually, the intention was to bring the landscape as a natural background within the framework of the garden. More than a "garden" garden, it is something between Man, Art, and Nature.

The circulation between Nature, Art, and Man is like this:

Nature in "Time"

Art in "Time"

Art in "Form"

Art in "Concept"

Concept in "Nature"

Nature in "Time"

Trees are planted only behind the garden wall, and their tips grow over the wall. Through the seasonal color changes of leaves and sky, their tips cast back into this garden of no trees, Nature's cycle.

Art in "Time"

The wall was made of several layers of earth which were mixed with oily pigments. As Time went by, the pigment oozed out. Time, approximately 500 years, left on this wall colors and shapes, an artificial spontaneousness. The picture on the wall is not finished yet, since the pigment still oozes out and Time continues.

Art in "Form"

The main object of the whole garden, inside all the natural and artificial "frames," is fifteen stones. The arrangement of these stones is derived from Zen paintings. In Zen paintings balance is created by arranging groups of five and three objects as well as the use of empty space. Instead of walking through the garden, the temple visitors view the garden from the wooden walkway. Because no one can enter, the

garden becomes more like a painting than a garden,
an "unwalkable garden."

Art in "Concept"

In Buddhism, sand metaphors ephemeral humanity. Early every morning, a disciple, in his highest state of concentration, will take the task of sweeping through the sand and leaving extremely parallel straight lines in the garden as well as in his ephemeral humanity. There are two levels of the garden. Visually, the eye perceives the fifteen rocks on parallel lines to be islands set in the ocean. Metaphysically, fifteen transcendencies are set in the stern doctrines drawn from the ephemeral humanity. Art and concept become one because you can never view the completeness of those fifteen rocks, yet, everyone knows that there are totally fifteen.

Concept in "Nature"

Transcendancy means that you know "that is" and "that isn't." Water is non-color, yet no one sees non-color water.

A rock garden is neither a garden nor a painting, but a drawing on a mirror. Because it is a drawing on a

mirror, Nature casts, Mind reflects, and art exists

Because art exists, "self" is extinct.

Because "the self" is extinct, you perceive the "non-color" and "fifteen" rocks.

Because you perceive "non-color" and "fifteen," that "is" and that "isn't"

Because that "is" and that "isn't," Zen conceived.

Because Zen conceived, Mind casts and Nature reflects.

Because Mind casts and Nature reflects, sky and twigs cross all the frames.

Because sky and twigs cross all the frames, rocks are vitalized.

Because rocks are vitalized, garden is colorized and "self" comes back.

Because garden is colorized and "self" comes back, art is stylized.

Because art is stylized, doctrines are derived.

Because doctrines are derived, ephemera thrives.

Because ephemera thrives, Zen comes back.

.....

CHAPTER III

INEFFABLE ICONS

Buddha, "the enlightened one," represents not a single person such as Allah in Islam or God in Christianity, but an aspiration which transcends all philosophical concepts of being and non-being. The language of enlightenment was spoken by Buddhist art through the struggle in the image of none, the Udayana legend, the image of an ornament.

1. Image of none

"He who is so released in perfect freedom from conceptual thought,....as the flame is blown by the force of wind, goes out and no longer reckoned....so said the Lord to Upasiva."³ It was believed that the Buddha "who has gone beyond the fetters" of body can not be endowed by art with a likeness of body. So, in front of the Stupa of Amaravati (relic mound), we can see empty space given meaning by use of the combination of the empty throne and wheel.

2. Udayana Legend

According to a legend reported in many different sources, the very first image of Buddha was a sandalwood

statue carved in the Master's lifetime for King Udayana of Kausambi. The story relates that "When Tathagata first arrived at complete Enlightenment, he ascended into Heaven to preach the Law for the benefit of his mother, and for three months remained absent. King Udayana, thinking of him with affection, desired to have an image of his person, therefore, he asked Mudgalyayanaputra by a spiritual power to transport an artist to the heavenly mansions to observe the excellent marks of the Buddha's body and carve a sandalwood statue.

The legend of the Udayana statue is embroidered upon in certain Tibetan texts by the additional information that the Buddha, in order to facilitate the task of the artist who was blinded by the Tathagata's effulgent brilliance, obligingly cast his reflection upon the surface of a pool.⁴

3. Alexander the Great and a Hindu god

In 327 B.C., the anthropomorphic tradition of the Hellenic world arrived at the Indus River with Alexander the Great. When the essential nature of Buddha still remained metaphysical, Krishna, the Hindu god, said, "None who is devoted to me is lost."⁵ To the Buddhist artist, an easier way was offered: an object and a religious form. From the Apollo prototype of Gandahara Buddha, the sheer bulk of Mathura Buddha, the plastic austerity of Andhra

Buddha, to the geometric lyric beauty of Gupta and Sarnath Buddha; in those eyes of lotus buds, those lips of the fullness of the mango, those heads of perfect oval, those images of images, perception of perception....art has tried all the possibilities to cast that effulgent reflection in the water.

4. Cold Monk and Ornament

Like the Indian did, Chinese digested Buddhism. It was said that one day, in the biggest temple, the old master confused all his disciples by merely holding a flower in his fingers and smiling, instead of giving any doctrine. It was at that moment when only Hui-Neng, a monk, could apprehend the gesture and, by returning a smile to his master, the Zen cult was born.

In one of those Chinese counterparts of Korean ink paintings, two monks were painted. Those two monks, wearing the smile of intelligent naughtiness, looked cold and were making a fire. A short poem was placed on the corner of the painting: "It is so cold in this broken temple in such a winter night. Why don't we just burn those Buddha statues to make a fire?" Why do we need an icon, after we have renounced this world?" Why do we need the doctrine, if enlightenment could be achieved through a gesture? Buddhist Art, as an ornament, shaped by people, thrived

throughout China, Korea and Japan, even after the decline of Buddhism in India.

CHAPTER IV

TOLSTOY AND A BUDDHA'S IMAGE

On January 15, 1910, Leo Tolstoy wrote the following in his journal: "I have keenly experienced consciousness of myself today, at eighty-one years, exactly as I was conscious of myself at five or six years. Consciousness is motionless. And it is only because of its motionlessness that we are able to see the motion of that which we call time. If time passes, it is necessary that there should be something which remains static. And it is consciousness of self which is static."⁶

Reality, although it is hardly real, is sometimes viewed more clearly from the reverse point of view. Even though it is the work of a Christian, Tolstoy's journal could be very much about a Buddha's image. Like the static consciousness of self conceives the passage of time, a Buddha image is a static existence in terms of motionless consciousness. Therefore, in the static pose, the austere style, the neutral emptiness, something beyond its existence is visualized.

CHAPTER V

COUNTING COWS AND THE FIRST UTOPIA

A story in the first grade text book (at least there was when I was in the first grade, and also when my uncles, aunts, and cousins were) is about a fool counting cows. That fool was always missing one cow since he was riding on one of them and never counted the one which he was on. Like many other silly sayings and boring lessons which were stuffed into my childhood, this story reappears, once in awhile, under different guises such as the "rock Garden," "the effulgent reflection" and "the first Utopia." In Greek, before the distortion through Thomas More's translation in 1516, Utopia meant "nowhere." Karl Mannhein, in his Ideology and Utopia (1936) said, "The disappearance of Utopia brings about a static state of affairs in which man himself becomes no more than a thing."⁷

It is very important that a person remains being a fool and aware of his own foolishness. There will be no more rock garden if those fifteen rocks are all viewed at one point, no more effulgent reflection if the brilliance of Tathagata didn't blind the sensible artist. Lau Tsu, in his Tao Te Ching said, "The nameless is the beginning of ten thousand things. The named is the mother of ten thousand things. Ever desireless, one can see the mystery.

Ever desiring, one can see the manifestations."⁸

Like the fool counting cows and the Utopian running to nowhere, painters (at least I do) can condense something from their lingering ideas of this floating world. As the artist is desiring and also desireless, the works turn out to be named and nameless. I think that art is neither intelligent nor anti-intelligent, but something beyond.

MY INTERPRETATION

CHAPTER I
ABOUT MATERIAL

Haniwa and Encounter of Materials

Looking through my studio window six floors below, people are rushing around on Main Street. That always reminds me of opening an ant's nest. During the long winter when the wind sweeps through and the snowy street becomes icy, people will walk like villagers in a Japanese wood-cut print or a Chinese folk painting. One day in my studio I was thinking of a saying of Ree Morton:

"We, the willing,
led by the unknowing,
are doing the impossible,
for the ungrateful.
We have done so much
with so little,
for so long.
We are now qualified
to do anything⁹
with nothing."

That saying bothered me somehow. My friend, Miriam Lapham dropped in to see me one day. She has been painting since she received her MFA a year ago. She told me, "You just have to ask yourself what in your life you really want to do most." Then, do it. "Don't think about anything else, because there are so many things to do and so little time to do it." In the same moment, while the slight wrinkle around her shining eyes distracted my attention,

my mother, grandmother, sister, aunts, grand-aunts, and all those women from my most pious memory of self-commitment, merged into my mind and together were listening to Miriam with me.

Right now, a Haniwa Terracotta, a lotus shaped bowl, and a Hellenic statue are passing through my mind. The Haniwa Terracotta said, "~~Let the material take charge~~ of the object. Speak the language of mud." The lotus shaped bowl said, "Let the material play with the object. Mud could speak the language of jade." The Hellenic statue said, "Let the object take charge of the material. Speak the language of human beings who are sons of god."

When those action painters of the 60's went up to the easel with materials in their hands and did something to that piece of canvas in front of them, art sometimes resulted. The attitude and the commitment to the material is close to the attitude of a Haniwa Terracotta. But when Jackson Pollock said, "I am nature..." (or, he is "in the painting," "in nature"...) ¹⁰ he is in nature as though he himself is a flower, not mud. That is a kind of Hellenic radiance which penetrates through his artist's ego and reveals itself in his paintings and that also metaphysically differentiates abstract-expressionism from the oriental consciousness.

Language of Jade

A lotus shaped bowl, like jade, came into my mind when I was reading what James Joyce said, in his Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: "Beauty expressed by artists awaken in us....an esthetic stasis."¹¹ Like the lotus which rooted from the mud and grew to be the flower of transcendence, this lotus shaped bowl was made of mud and had gone through the fire. When an appreciator walked up to it, at that moment of esthetic stasis, it became something that in the Chinese sense, was a jade. Instead of a typical jade color, this bowl wore a bright but not shining, condensed but also whimsical kind of white cover. Under the white surface, concealed all over, like the vein in the lotus, are lines of spontaneous breaks within the ceramic. The shape, like the color, concealed sensible vibration (such as the curve of the lotus petals on the edge of the bowls) within the rational refinements. During the painting period, whenever I encountered materials, it was that image of a lotus bowl, that sensible vibration within rational refinement, that sophisticated spontaneity, which brought in the language of jade and awakened in me an esthetic stasis. It was also that kind of language of jade and Haniwa that ideally brought a laughing frog into the yin-yang ring, a solo dancer into her whimsical atmosphere, a dragon fly and mosquitoes into the trans-

formation between panels, a grasshopper into the wind of calligraphy, a rabbit into the chess grid, a "jen" (character used by Japanese and Chinese) into iconography....

When Lotus Wheel Meet "Tai-Chi"

Indian Buddhism doctrine, if symbolized, could be a wheel of lotus. That is a lotus flower as the hub and radiant wheel turning forward with a life cycle around the lotus hub. That indicates nirvana.

Chinese Taoism thought, if symbolized, could be the emblem of Yin-Yang which is a sphere of chaos with movement of Yin(negative) and Yang(positive). This indicates a balance of cosmic phenomenon. What happened when, thousand years ago, Buddhism came to China, like a lotus wheel turning into Tai-Chi emblem?

A Chinese Buddhism artist carved a stamp for his friend which, in a freehand style, said, "I am the Buddha's youngest brother." On the handle part of the stamp he carved, "My friend wanted me to carve those words for him but he felt it unpolite to Buddha. I told him that if you sincerely understand Buddha, he'll treat you like a friend. Now you only say that you are his youngest brother, so, you are actually very humble."

When I, through the Yin-Yang, or, a cosmic point of view, thought of Buddhism and Nature, I felt like

putting a smiling frog on top of the lotus seat just the same way as putting a Buddha's image on it.

CHAPTER II

REUNION OF PICTURE AND MEANING, IN THE LANGUAGE OF ALPHABET LOST

There is no conflict at all, in ancient oriental art, between painting and literature or between picture and meaning. Wong Wei, a poet and also painter, said, "Poetry is in my painting also painting is in my poetry." Chinese painters always interpreted nature through their sense of calligraphy. Although, in Asia, there was never any kind of abstract art like Western abstract paintings, calligraphy had always existed as an abstract form between art and literature. For those who could never accept any abstract art, calligraphy, which was sometimes so transformed that the literal meaning could barely be identified, was always naturally acceptable. I believe that, through calligraphy, a reunion of literature and art, of picture and meaning, can be reached.

This kind of re-connection is easier in a language with no alphabet and pictographical words. In Chinese, a single character, or a combination of two or more characters depicts an object, act, or thought with a vividness possible only in pictographic writing.

The word which I put in between my iconographic portraits is "jen" (goodness). Jen is visually composed of "man" and "two", referring to human relationships. It literally signifies a compassionate and altruistic attitude and action. This is like literally and pictorially writing "two men" in between the portraits of two single figures of men. When the analyzed words and the disposition of characters abstract the words from their daily meaning, the calligraphic iconography also abstracts the portrait from its visual meaning and forms another dimension. This re-connection spontaneously happens because both painting and literature are derived from the same visual and metaphysical root of calligraphy.

CHAPTER III

I SEE MY FOOTPRINTS

Although it is tiny, and, going to be obliterated,
my footprint is on the way.

Although the progress can never
compare with the long long trip,
right now the infinitesimal "one" is so delighted
with this clear print.

I can not, and I do not want, to think about
those which are always far, far away.

Do not delay, just go on, go on and go on.

FOOTNOTES

1. Michael Sullivan, The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art, (Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1973), p. 152.
2. Lao Tsu, Tao Te Ching, (New York: Random House Inc., 1972), p. 2.
3. David L. Snellgrove, The Image of The Buddha, (New York: Kodansha International/ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 1978), p. 23-24
4. Benjamin Rowland Jr., The Evolution of The Buddha Image, (Japan: Asia House Gallery Publication, 1963), p.5
5. Ibid., p.6
6. The Art Institute OF Chicago, 73rd American Exhibition, (Illinois: The Art Institute Of Chicago, 1973), p. 12
7. Karl Mannheim, Ideology and Utopia, (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p.117
8. Lao Tsu, Tao Te Ching, (New York: Random House Inc., 1972), p. 2.
9. Allan Schwartzman and Kathleen Thomas, Ree Morton Retrospective 1971-1977, (New York: The New Museum, 1980), p. 70
10. Ellen H. Johnson, Modern Art and the Object, (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 110-114.
11. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, (New York: The Viking Press, 1963), p.206.



ON TOP OF THE LOTUS SEAT,
BUDDHA'S YOUNGEST BROTHER IS SMILING
THROUGH THE LIFE GIVING RING OF
YING AND YANG

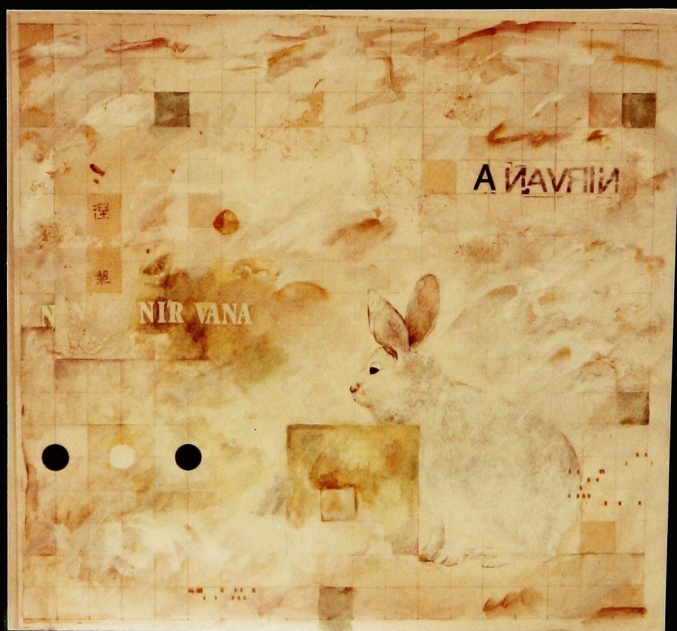


OF COURSE YOU CAN NOT SEE THE DRAGON ANYMORE

KU KAI-CHI, THE CHINESE MASTER, PAINTED THE
DRAGON SO VIVIDLY THAT IT FLEW BACK TO THE
HEAVEN IN ONE OF THE THUNDERING NIGHTS



I LIFT MY WINE CUP TO INVITE THE BRIGHT
MOON, WITH MY SHADOW BESIDE ME,
WE HAVE A PARTY OF THREE



NIRVANA



BY THE POND



IN THIS DREAM - LIKE FLOATING LIFE



WHEN WIND BLOWS THROUGH THE HERMIT, IN THE LAND OF ALPHABET LOST



HAPPY WANDERING



ICONS WITH CALLIGRAPHY



SPRING

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